

Teaching Sociology

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Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System That Shapes Their Lives. Jeff Schmidt. Latham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield. 2000. 293 pages. \$21.95.

Let's hope that Schmidt will consider pursuing a second career as a social critic or even a social scientist. Schmidt was fired from *Physics Today* magazine, allegedly for writing his fascinating book, *Disciplined Minds*, "on stolen time," as he explains in the introduction (Sharlet and Ruark 2000; Ruark 2002). The story of Schmidt's fate—his book was evidence of lack of commitment to his day job—could fit nicely into his account of "the soul battering system" that shapes the lives of professionals. Schmidt argues that professional work is political, but professionals lack control over the political component of their work. Indeed, holding the right "attitude toward working within an assigned political and ideological framework" (p. 16), not a particular set of technical skills, is the primary qualification for becoming a professional.

The key job requirement for a professional, for Schmidt, is ideological discipline, or the ability to exercise creativity within firm political limits. He develops this argument in the first part of the book that includes discussions of jurors (professionals for a week), imposters, and disbarred attorneys. His main topic is the "assigned curiosity" of physicists, who tailor their work to receive government funding and then hide the military applications of their research behind technical language.

Part two, the longest section of the book, describes the selection mechanisms whereby people without ideological discipline are weeded from the ranks of potential professionals, particularly by standardized tests and graduate school qualifying exams. Schmidt makes a useful distinction between necessary and gratuitous bias. The latter include infamous SAT questions that favor those with exposure to horse riding and ballet. These are Freudian slips that suggest whom the exam writers have in mind as likely professionals. However, this bias is gratuitous because some lower class and minority students are able to develop the ideological discipline needed to function within the system. Necessary bias, by contrast, weeds out potential professionals who are unwilling to abide by the status quo. Standardized tests favor "those who feel comfortable working within arbitrary rules, who are used to working out technical details within a dictated framework, who make their way in the world

through careful attention to the rules" (p. 191).

In the third and final part of the book, Schmidt covers ways that people can resist the system. Here he veers toward rhetorical excess, casting graduate programs as "cult indoctrination" and adopting resistance strategies from a U.S. Army field manual for potential prisoners of war. Still, the section is sure to generate classroom discussion, especially Schmidt's suggestions for becoming a radical professional, or one whose work contributes to "progress in the social structure—to more equality and democracy, to less hierarchy and authoritarianism" instead of a professional whose "assignments do little more than service some part of the social structure" (p. 265). The book closes with 33 suggestions for radical professionals, such as whistle blowing, airing dirty laundry in public, educating co-workers in various ways about the ideological nature of their work, and working to abolish professionals.

Three problems limit the potential usefulness of *Disciplined Minds* in an undergraduate classroom. First, the book is not informed by sociological literature. In this respect, the book compares unfavorably with, for example, Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* (2000), that covers some similar ground but builds from Weber's analysis of rationality. Second, the large portions of the book devoted to graduate school qualifying exams may not be of interest to many undergraduates. Third, much of Schmidt's data is anecdotal. One wonders, for instance, how typical is the horror story of the physics graduate student who was failed on his qualifying exam even though he scored higher than another student who was passed.

This book could be used as a monograph in courses on the sociology of work, organizations, education, or science because of its material on the training and work of physicists. However, its best use may be in undergraduate seminars for future graduate students or graduate seminars for new ones. Although the book paints a rather grim picture of graduate school, no doubt many sociology graduate students will find its portrayal a more accurate reflection of their experience than the typical how to survive graduate school manual. Questions raised in such seminars may also be of interest to the sociology professors who lead them. Professors generally see themselves as critical and humanistic, but who, according to Schmidt and the sociology graduate students he quotes at length, actually contribute to an inhumane system designed to produce uncritical professionals.

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Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice. Maryellen Weimer. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 2002. 258 pages. \$33.00.

Weimer is a veteran in the field teaching and learning; a field whose intellectual and ethical purpose is to encourage faculty to more systematically reflect on their teaching work and to bring to that aspect of their profession the same intentionality they bring to their disciplinary research. *Learner-Centered Teaching* is a roadmap for pursuing reflective practice more systematically, and a good road map, at that.

Current editor of *The Teaching Professor* newsletter, Weimer has authored and co-authored several previous books in this area, served as director of Penn State's Instructional Development Program, consulted at dozens of institutions, and frequently appears at national conferences on student learning and pedagogical reform. Yet, she is hardly someone lost on the education conference circuit or peddling the latest instructional fad. She brings it all home as a regular classroom teacher in the field of communications. In *Learner-Centered Teaching*, her goal is to present a general framework for improving teaching and learning grounded in recent formal research, wisdom about best practices, and her own experience. This framework can inform both the theory-in-use of individual instructors and more sharply define the direction of larger units like a department or college. Weimer's book moves fluidly back and forth between presenting findings from research studies, pondering sample materials and specific ideas from courses in various disciplines, and introducing worthy reform efforts from campuses around the country. She makes a consistent effort to identify fairly and address contrasting views and criticisms of her approach providing an extended, authentic conversation about teaching.

The book is in three sections: the first is a synthesis of her learner-centered paradigm; the second some words of advice for implementing it; and the third some appendices containing sample assignments and other materials from her own courses, as well as an annotated, interdisciplinary reading list to get someone started. Overall, I think the book would be useful as a core text for graduate courses on teaching methodology now cropping up in sociology departments, especially if accompanied by specifically sociological materials such as those available from the American Sociological Association Teaching Resources Center. It would also be helpful in faculty and curriculum development projects, because even experienced teachers doing the "Nth" program review will gain from exploring the issues related to classroom dynamics and curricular structure.

Weimer begins by explaining why she titled the book *Learner-Centered Teaching* rather than *learning centered* or *student-centered*. This is more than hairsplitting education-ese: talking about the learner focuses attention squarely on the students as people trying to construct knowledge with what we teach, thereby drawing us closer to the heart of the teaching-learning dynamic. If we talk mostly about learning, Weimer argues, we can too easily slide into abstractions about psychological constructs and their theoretical inter-relationships in aggregate data. And if we talk about *student-centeredness*, we end up framing issues in terms of student needs: "It is an orientation that gives rise to the idea of education as a product, with the student as the customer and the role of faculty as one of serving and satisfying the customer" (p. xvi). I like her points and am willing to go along with her choice of terms.

What, then, would it mean to be learner-centered? It is to focus on "what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning, and how current learning positions the student for future learning" (p. xvi). In her context-setting first chapter, Weimer explores how she became interested in this approach by reflecting on how her spouse learned to build a boat from scratch with little specific background. Add to that a deep reading of Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, and delving into the somewhat unsystematized research on learning. Weimer follows a confessional tradition that appears at times in books on teaching where, in the course of reflection and perhaps in the throes